

Toyota RAV 4

Featuring 2.0GX 5-door



JUST WHEN THE NOVELTY OF OWNING A four-wheel drive off-road vehicle seemed to be in decline, along comes Toyota with a racy little 4x4 number – the RAV 4. RAV stands for Recreational Active Vehicle, and its chic looks and leisure-oriented image are already proving quite a hit.

There was just a cheeky, keenly priced little three-door to start with, but as of mid 1995, Toyota added the family sized five-door version, considerably broadening the model's appeal. Both are powered by a 129bhp 16-valve two-litre petrol engine driving through a five-speed gearbox, with automatic available on all but the cheapest three-door. The latter comes in two specifications, GS and GX; the five-door version we sampled comes only in better-equipped GX form.

Unlike many other four-wheel drives, the RAV 4 uses a weight-saving, chassisless construction which brings significant performance and economy benefits. It has permanent four-wheel drive, too, without any extra knobs or levers to daunt inexperienced off-road drivers. On the other hand, it doesn't have a set of ultra-low, transfer gears needed to tackle steep or very demanding off-road conditions.

The sweet 16-valve engine provides surprisingly brisk performance, delivering lively 10sec 30 to 70mph acceleration along with a more than ample 110mph top speed. It also feels almost as lively in the gears, although like many multi-valve engines, it's happier with the revs kept up a bit. Indeed, the RAV 4 feels more like a GTi than a 4x4. But it isn't just a stopwatch sprinter; thanks to car-like vigour and agility, it's just as much fun on the road.

Getting in involves more of a step-up than with a normal car. But it's less arduous than climbing aboard some of the loftier MPVs, for example (at least at the front), but prominent rear wheelarches hinder access to the back seats.

Once the driver is aboard, it's about as easy and car-like as four-wheel drive can get, with a slick, though slightly notchy gearshift, well-sorted driving position and controls, plus a sporty oval-section leather-rimmed steering wheel to hang on to. The tilt-adjustable steering is power assisted and employs rack and pinion rather than the less direct ball-and-nut variety. With a compact $2\frac{3}{4}$ turns between locks, the resulting taut, responsive steering only adds to the overall fun and agility at the wheel.

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PERFORMANCE										SAFETY AND SECURITY FEATURES										
Acceleration time in seconds										Assessed on their effectiveness and convenience (the more black blobs the better)										
STANDING START		0-30mph 3.0			0-60mph 9.6			1/4 mile 17.3			Seatbelts					Door locking				
											front ●●●●○ rear ●●○○○					central locking? ☒				
											Head restraints					remote control? ☒				
											front ●●●●○ rear ●●●●○					auto window closure? ☒				
											Interior					deadlocks? ☒				
											safety padding ●●○○○					Luggage				
											driver's airbag? ☒					secure from interior/hidden				
											other airbags? ☒					from view ●○○○○				
											side impact protection ●●●○○					Alarm ●●●●○				
											Fuel anti-spillage ●●●○○					☒				
											☒ standard on test car					☐ factory fitted option				
											☒ not available									

Seatbelts

front ●●●●○ rear ●●○○○

Door locking

●●○○○

central locking?

✓

remote control?

✓

auto window closure?

✗

deadlocks?

✗

Head restraints

front ●●●●○ rear ●●●●○

Interior

safety padding ●●○○○

driver's airbag? ✓

other airbags? ✗

side impact protection ●●●○○

Luggage

secure from interior/hidden

from view ●○○○○

Alarm

●●●●○

Fuel anti-spillage ●●●○○

✓

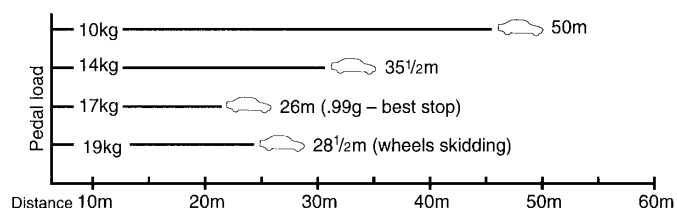
☒ standard on test car ☐ factory fitted option ☒ not available

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●○○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●●○○ Handbrake ●●○○○

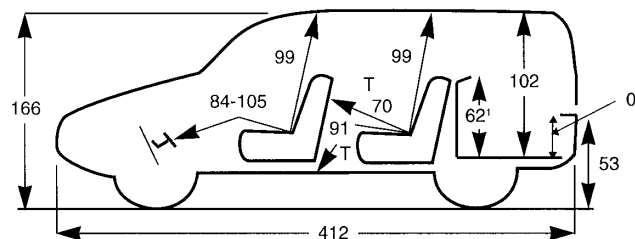
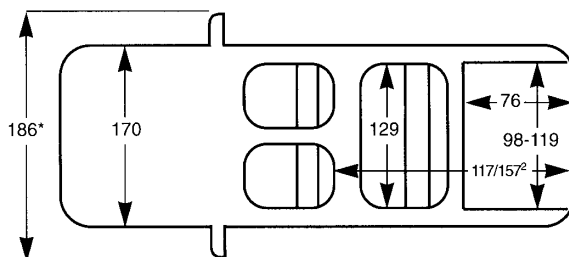
Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (no ABS)

(A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)


 Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:
 12kg at start of test, 16kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

DIMENSIONS – 5-door

Centimetres


 T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants
 1: to window level


*166 with mirrors folded

2: with rear seat removed

The front seats lack any height or lumbar support adjusters, but, mediocre spinal support apart, the seats are reasonably well shaped and supportive. The RAV 4's safety checklist includes height-adjustable seatbelts with pretensioners, a driver's (though not a passenger's) airbag, and height-adjustable head restraints, back and front. Anti-lock brakes aren't available, even from the options list.

Although the engine becomes quite noisy at high revs, the RAV 4 is impressively civilised most of the time, tackling long-distance motorway hauls with relaxed ease. Its compliant yet well-controlled ride sets new standards for the class, too, but some fidgety reaction over lumps and bumps around town is less impressive.

Although it's a full 41cm longer than the three-door model, the five-door is barely longer than an Escort at the kerbside. Nevertheless, it still manages to provide family accommodation with a big, square-shaped load area behind, along with 3–5cm more headroom than in a typical family saloon.

The split-folding back seat is cramped for adults, though, while the big, side-hinged tailgate can be unwieldy in tight spaces. Apart from helpful front and rear courtesy lamps, worked by their respective sets of doors, the RAV 4 also sports a pair of handy drinks-holders, plus small, lidded lockers located on either side of the load area. The five-door comes with a full remote-controlled alarm, together with a transponder key engine immobiliser. It's a pity that there's no security cover to conceal the luggage from prying eyes, however.

The RAV 4's weight-saving construction not only contributes to the car's lively performance and agile handling, it also reaps significant rewards at the fuel pumps. The 31mpg we averaged wouldn't be too spectacular for a medium-sized family saloon, but it is impressive for a bulky four-wheel drive, especially one with all four wheels permanently driven. Fit and finish are up to Toyota's usual exemplary standards, and supported by a reassuring three-year, 60,000-mile warranty.

VERDICT

The RAV 4 doesn't impart quite the same lofty superiority some of the bigger, more dedicated off-roaders do, but it's streets more fun to drive. It's more refined and affordable, too, and doesn't come with their 4x4-sized fuel bills.

It's got looks, pace, practicality and (restricted back seat apart) provides sufficient space for the family, although the five-door looks a bit pricey – if you can live with the three-door's more coupé-like accommodation.

It's not as big or as butch as the Frontera, Discovery or Maverick, neither can it match their ultimate off-road dexterity. Indeed, the lack of a stout steel chassis and a set of transfer gears makes it unappealing for embarking on serious antics over tough terrain. To be fair, though, the RAV 4 doesn't claim to be an out and out off-roader, it's a leisure oriented vehicle whose "off piste" talents should comfortably handle most that the mountain-biking, hand-gliding and surfboard set can throw at it.

Likes . . . and gripes

Cheeky, appealing looks . . . but five-door pricey
4x4 talents with GTi performance . . . but no transfer ratios
Generous headroom . . . but back seat tight for adults
Roomy, square-shaped load area . . . but side-hinged tailgate and no security cover
Convenient fore-and-aft courtesy lighting . . . but limited space for nick-nacks

HOW THE RAV 4 COMPARES

	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom – front (cm)	Typical leg/ kneeroom – rear (cm)	Steering turns/ circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
Toyota RAV 4 (5-door) (5)	1988/129	3325	10.0	23.3/18.0	31	26/17	105	91/70	2.8/11.3(p)	412
Mitsubishi Space Wagon 2.0GLXi (7)	1997/131	3510	9.3	21.6/15.6	31	25/23	102	100/74	3.2/11.6(p)	452
Nissan Terrano 2.4SLX (5-door) (7)	2389/122	3205	15.3	38.7/25.1	24	34½/16	104	104/80	4.4/11.4(p)	458
Renault Espace 2.1RT T/diesel (7)	2068/88	2825	16.7	30.8/22.9	36	26/25*	100	94/71	2.8/10.9(p)	442
Subaru Legacy 2.2GX Estate auto (5)	2212/134	3000	10.8	n/a	26	24/18*	108	103/75	3.3/10.6(p)	462
(Maximum seating capacity shown in brackets)						* with ABS			(p) power steering	